

# The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography

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(Some material in this paper was drawn from an address given by Professor W. H. Oliver, the DNZB's General Editor, and published in *Archifacts*, June 1984).

The Dictionary of NZ Biography is the major government-sponsored publication of 1990, and will be one of the most significant publications to appear this year. More than that; I predict that it will be considered 'the book of the 1990s' — the book of the New Zealand people.

In June the Governor General, Sir Paul Reeves, will launch the first volume, an English language volume covering the period 1769 to 1869; and at the end of this year the second volume — in the Maori language — will be launched.

That's only the beginning of course. The Department of Internal Affairs and Allen & Unwin have entered into a joint venture for the publication of a series of volumes. Our publication programme is now established for at least a further 5 or 6 volumes, in English and Maori, to appear in 1992, 1994, and 1996. The final volumes will extend coverage to a point close to the present day, and when the Dictionary is complete the series will constitute the country's most substantial reference work in history and biography — as well as the only bi-lingual one.

Today I have been asked to speak on three aspects of the Dictionary, to give:

- 1: a description of the process of compiling the book;
- 2: a summary of the finished product;
- 3: to forecast its significance for libraries and the community.

Before I look at those points I'd like to give you a brief history of the DNZB and to set our project in the context of the world family of dictionaries of biography.

## HISTORY

When the DNZB unit was established in August 1983 (funded by Vote Internal Affairs and Lottery Grants Board monies), it comprised only Bill Oliver and an administrative assistant. At the same time a Policy Committee was set up, with a representative membership, to assist in advising and establishing guidelines. Three other staff (including myself) joined the Dictionary unit in March 1984. Today the Dictionary has 15 full-time staff and a number of part-timers. When work peaked early last year on volume I our staff climbed to close on 30 — the biggest history department in New Zealand. At present we have several additional Maori specialists pushing our first Maori language volume towards publication.

We have a fairly complicated schedule of work, but in brief there are three major processes currently occupying us:

- the on-going compilation of an extensive computerised database of biographical entries;
- the preparation of our second English volume covering subjects who flourished first between 1870 and 1900 (selection of subjects, commissioning and editing);
- and the translation and editing of our first Maori language volume, covering Maori subjects who appear in the English volume between 1769 and 1869.

Meanwhile, our first volume is going through printing and a good deal of our time is engaged in publicity relating to four or more launching ceremonies.

## DICTIONARIES OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY

Biographical dictionaries, since the early 19th century, have been expressions of cultural nationalism. The makers of the DNB, confident in their national identity, did not even trouble to indicate their country in the title. More recently the Canadians have reflected their concern with national identity by publishing in two languages, French and English. The Australians, when they began in the 1960s, more or less took national identity for granted, their starting date being 1788 and their early volumes having a notable absence of Aborigines. And the Indians took a rather extreme stance on nationalism, the criterion for selection being the contribution made to national independence. (To make this work they had to include the living as well as the dead.) Each of these Dictionaries, in its own way, is an inheritor of what the DNB reflected: that the nation had become the basic unit of 19th century historical research and publication.

In New Zealand, in this late 20th century, we have inherited the conditions within which biographical dictionaries in the modern form were conceived; both the assumption of national identity and imperative towards historical research. The birth of the DNZB was indeed conceived with 1990 in mind, and this has justified the generous financial support that we receive. Yet some might question whether the later 20th century is a time for national history. The trend of specialist research over the last few decades has been away from the nation towards smaller and more specific entities and wider problems that cannot be explored within national limits. Regional and local history, women's and ethnic history and thematic social history have begun to demonstrate that national history is not — as Bill Oliver puts it — 'the history of the whole, as it claims to be, but of a dominant part — a white, male and powerful part.'

From the outset of our project, therefore, Professor Oliver set the goal of a dictionary of NZ (and not national) biography. He aimed to include in it the important, naturally, since it was essentially a reference text; so you will find in the DNZB a fair representation of the nation-makers: politicians, bureaucrats, soldiers, clergyman and judges. But he was concerned that the criteria for selection should pay less attention to nation-wide eminence, to notability and to that attribute of the nation-state, the exercise of power. He wanted the criteria for selection to operate both more narrowly and more widely:

more narrowly, in recognising that reputation was often achieved within less than national limits, that it was, e.g. often of a regional, tribal, ethnic or professional kind;

more widely, by deliberately extending the criteria of significance well beyond the limits which fill most biographical dictionaries with a multitude of success stories: portraits of men (overwhelmingly) who climbed to the top in politics, business, war and the professions.

And so, by looking at the sub-national milieux, we have been able to incorporate a number of 'middling' people, as characteristic of their times and places as the more celebrated. The notorious have earned a place, as have the inventors, the rebels, the eccentrics, prophets, idealists, reformers, crusaders, performers, entertainers, publicans,



worthies and characters — many of them rescued from obscurity to sit (at times a trifle oddly) beside the more obvious heroes of the national pantheon.

We have also made a major effort to penetrate to the level of the sub-articulate. The past of a country is not made up wholly of those whose words have been preserved in accessible form — politicians, journalists, men of letters — or of those silent men whose deeds left a mark in the words of others.

In setting new criteria of significance, however, perhaps the most notable feature of the DNZB is the policy to give a substantial place to women and to the Maori people. Major research efforts were mounted in both respects. Roughly 20% of the entries in the first volume are essays on women and there are 160 Maori biographies.

But it remains the case that there are areas of Maori activity, at tribal level, that we have not succeeded in capturing, largely for lack of written documentation. And for the same reason, in the main, we have managed to incorporate women, but not in the numbers some might have hoped for. As one of our writers once commented: "You could indeed put more women in the Dictionary, but their lives are so similar. They are like 'peas in a pod'".

#### COMPILATION

Before selection could be made for volume I, a great deal of the unit's work went into establishing a database: an archive from which choices could be made. For volume I, e.g., we selected from roughly 2,500 'barebones' biographies. This information is arranged in structured fields, using Digital equipment and the Government Print's Vax gear as our main storage facility. The information, gathered initially on Basic Information Sheets, (BIS) (which we keep) has come from four or five sources: the unit itself, and from individuals, specialist consultants on certain interests, societies and institutions, but mainly from over 20 regional and specialist working parties, to whom we are much indebted.

The data base currently holds approximately 6,500 biographical entries. Eventually we expect it to contain something like 12,000 entries. For our second volume we are currently selecting from another 2,500 or more entries. But this time we have the assistance of a larger staff, whereas for the first volume three of us sometimes came close to drowning in miles of print-outs.

One advantage of computer storage is of course its ability to search and retrieve — and this is put to use in assessing the balances in the selection process — gender, ethnicity, region, religion, and activity. It is also put to work in assessing the contribution of Working Parties, so that an area light on women, or perhaps on a local specialist occupation, can be revealed. Sometimes such discoveries mean additional work at the unit itself.

The aim of the selection process is to end up with a list for commissioning that will relate to both the history of the period being dealt with (i.e. the narrative) and the structure (i.e. the description) of NZ. In the latter respect the criteria of selection supplement the elitist tendency of a narrowly narrative approach, as well as serving the need for representativeness.

The data-base in the long-term will of course be an important research tool, but at present it is largely unchecked. We have made a big effort in the four to five months since final editing for volume I to "clean-up" the database from the checked essays going to publication. But these are the only subjects that we can verify at this

stage. And this is an important consideration in our caution about making the data-base more widely available to the public.

#### THE FIRST VOLUME, 1769-1869

Our first volume is big, 692 pages. The biographical essays range in length from 500 to around 4,000 words. Most fall in the 750 and 1,000 length bracket.

There are also comprehensive indexes:

— a 43-page nominal index, compiled as essays were edited;

— a tribal and hapu index;

— and a 12 page categories index, i.e. an index that will help you find the unknown subjects; those who have remained obscure but who will shortly strut the stage of our history, so that you will not solely be opening the pages of the DNZB with a name in mind — Seddon, Grey, Aubert — but be coming to the book to find out who were the midwives, the little shop-keepers, the bullock-drivers, the makers of our land, the Maori leaders, the police — and more.

A further breakdown might be of interest.

#### Essays

Total number of essays is 572: 412 European; 160 Maori

Total number of subjects, 588: 427 European; 161 Maori

Total number of women, 116: of which 21 are Maori

Total number of men, 469: of which 139 are Maori

Number of joint essays, 16

Male/female entries, 8: 7 husband and wife

1 father and daughter

Male/male entries, 7: 2 father and son

5 brothers

*Authors:* We have 287 authors of whom 18 did joint entries (10 male/female).

Women authors number 103. They wrote on 233 subjects: 89 women and 144 men.

Male authors number 182. They wrote on 351 subjects: 328 men and 23 women.

Staff, too, wrote a good many essays: 100 were written by 13 staff members, two of whom produced 81 essays, mainly on Maori subjects.

#### THE MAORI VOLUME, 1769-1869

The Maori volume is in the Maori language and comprises those essays on Maori subjects that are printed in the first volume I have just described. There are 160 biographies with one extra man incorporated in one biography. The selection for these subjects, first for the English volume, was a difficult task in itself. So, too, is the enormous effort to render in Maori the stories of these lives. It seems that the Maori volume will print out at around 300,000 words, a very large publication indeed — probably the biggest since the translation of the Bible. Like the English volume, we intend that the Maori volume should have a comprehensive index.

We are also making important decisions on macrons and language use, with the assistance of a Maori editorial committee. And the arrangement of the essays, probably alphabetically but in tribal clusters, will reflect a Maori way of relating subjects by whanau. But we are acutely aware that we are treading new ground in very many decisions, not least in trying to produce in a European-oriented way, what is essentially a companion volume to a reference work. As such, it must inevitably have a strong relationship to the main reference text, yet by so doing we may run the risk of compromising the very aim we hope to meet, i.e. that the Maori volume will reflect something



particularly Maori in its organisation and presentation.

#### RESEARCH AND EDITORIAL PROCESS

I have said little about the processes of research and checking which lie behind the published volumes, but some points must be made. First, I doubt if such extensive checking of written work has ever been carried out on such a scale before in NZ. Each essay is subjected to careful scrutiny from a textual and a factual point of view. A very great deal of work has been put into verifying life data for example (and we looked to the advice of the genealogists in this). Some readers may find us over-cautious in our approach to life data, but we have tried to convey to the reader a clear message of the reliability (or otherwise) of such information, and this is laid out in the introduction to the volume.

Each essay passes through many hands and under many eyes in the editorial process, but all essays are seen at least three times by the General Editor and sometimes by the Associate Editor — both acting as a kind of central control point which, in addition to copy-editing, ensures a degree of consistency — and, more importantly, what the management people are currently calling 'value-added input'.

Research has thrown up real needs in NZ archives: a need for better organised church archives, for finding lists, for indexes to journals, newspapers and periodicals (in English and Maori), for listings of pa and early settlement sites and for accurate spelling of the same; above all for co-operation between holding institutions and those of us dealing in "bulk history", which often touches on a very wide range of other disciplines.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DNZB

Dictionaries of biography are expensive and time-consuming to produce. Guy Scholefield's Dictionary was published in 1940, 50 years ago. If that is any indication, then the DNZB will carry us well into the 20th century, possibly one day being up-dated and corrected in CD-ROM form. Yes, I did say corrected; for in spite of careful research of essays we are bound to have corrigenda and have already put in place a system for dealing with them.

Compared with other dictionaries of national biography, the DNZB is in a class of its own. The Maori language

volume for example will be a unique teaching aid at secondary and tertiary levels. Sponsorship has been obtained to ensure the free presentation of both volumes to secondary schools; and a teacher guide is being written in conjunction with the Ministry of Education.

The Dictionary's main volumes will provide a much needed reliable, invaluable reference resource for librarians, educational institutions and the general public.

But the Dictionary is much more than a reference text. It is a document of the 1980s and the 1990s. It makes (and will continue to make), at least implicitly, statements which have a political and ideological significance within those decades.

For in creating this dictionary the General Editor has made a conscious effort to move away from the traditional focus on white, middle class, professional and 'national', and has tried to present a view of the country's past shaped by our present concerns. As he himself said in our early planning stages:

'There is no definitive history and no definitive biography. There are only valid and invalid constructs derived from evidence; the evidence that is recognised and the meanings derived from it are shaped by the awareness of the observer. The observations people make of the past in the 1980s [and this applies equally to the 1990s] will be — and should be — coloured by the self-awareness of this society in this decade.

'The 1980s has been a decade sometimes anxiously concerned with a range of issues related to race, gender, class, age, environment, economic and international security. If the Dictionary is to be faithful to the present, as well as the past, both the selection and treatment of entries will be influenced by current concern with such issues. It would not [and does not] reflect particular positions on the issues, but rather a belief that they matter. If this sounds like the present discovering itself in the past and so shaping a picture of the past, that is just what it is, and what all good history has always been.'

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## Alice Ethel Minchin, 1889 - 1966.

OLIVE JOHNSON

Although Alice Minchin seems to have been largely forgotten, and did not even rate an obituary in *New Zealand Libraries* when she died in 1966, she was, in her way, a remarkable woman to whom Auckland University Library, at least, owes a considerable debt. The dwindling number of people who knew her as a colleague remember her well as a very handsome woman, attractive to men (though she never married, and said she had never wished to), a strong tennis player and a keen golfer, interested in theatre and ballet, a dispenser of hot roast Sunday dinners to many friends, an enthusiastic interior decorator and gardener. But the impression one gets from talking to these former friends is of a very private person, who found it difficult, if not impossible, to reach out emotionally to

other people — even to those for whom she felt affection and to whom she showed great kindness and generosity. Apart from her sister's three children, for whom she made a home after their mother's death, she does not seem to have cared very much for family ties, and appears to have had little or no contact with most of her father's many siblings or their children, except for the uncle and aunt in England who made it possible for her to receive part of her education there.

Her grandfather, the Rev. William Minchin, who died in 1869, was born in Ireland of a family of 'landed gentry'. Of his nineteen children, several appear to have settled, sometimes after extensive travels, in Australia or New Zealand. Alice's father, Charles Humphrey, born in 1834,